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ABSTRACT

One hundred fifteen members of the organization Parents Without Partners were surveyed for their communication attitudes in a study examining the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and a dramatic, stress-producing situation--the loss of a spouse through death, legal separation, or divorce. The survey measured the ways the subjects matched three communicator types: (1) the rhetorically sensitive person, one who generally accepted the variability of communication and interpersonal relationships and did not try to avoid stylized verbal behavior; (2) the "noble self," one who would see any variation from personal norms as hypocritical and a denial of integrity; and (3) the "rhetorical reflector," who would present a different self for each person or situation. The results of the attitude survey revealed that the widowed subjects scored significantly lower on rhetorical sensitivity and significantly higher on noble self than did the divorced/separated subjects. No significant differences were found between the two groups as rhetorical reflector types. Based on these results, it was hypothesized that the grieving process may differ for the two groups, creating variations in the way these people reorder their social systems after the loss of a spouse. (RL)

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ADULT LIFE TRANSITIONS: AN ASSESSMENT OF RHETORICAL SENSITIVITY FOLLOWING LOSS OF SPOUSE

Gary M. Shulman & Dudley D. Cahn

Hart and Burks claim that the rhetorical approach to the study of communication, in which communicative behavior is viewed as purposive, facilitates human understanding and social cohesion.[1] In their presentation of what rhetoric-in-action can be, they offer five characteristics of rhetorical sensitivity which if effectively utilized in communication with others can help people make the most out of their social interactions. This would be especially important and desirable to those coping with transition and find themselves in the position of having to rebuild or, at least, adapt to changes in their social system.

The rhetorically sensitive person was theorized to be one who attempts to (1) accept role taking as part of the human condition; (2) avoid stylized verbal behavior; (3) undergo the strain of adaptation; (4) distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication; and (5) understand that an idea can be rendered in multiform ways. Recently, these behaviors have been recast into the following five primary attitude attributes: acceptance of personal complexity, avoidance of communicative rigidity, interaction consciousness, appreciation of the communicability of ideas, and tolerance of inventional searching.[2] In short, the rhetorically sensitive person is "an undulating, fluctuating entity, always unsure, always guessing, continually weighing (potential communication decisions)."[3]

One gains further perspective into the rhetorical sensitivity (RS) concept by comparing it to the alternative "noble self" and "rhetorical reflector" types. Noble selves (NS) "see any variation from their personal norms as hypocritical, as a denial of integrity, as a cardinal sin", while

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rhetorical reflectors (RR) "have no self to call their own. For each person and for each situation they present a new self."[4]

The concept of rhetorical sensitivity and its alternative typologies are of interest to communication researchers. For example, rhetorical sensitity has been studied in the academic[5] and business/professional settings[6].

It seems reasonable to expect that one who is highly rhetorically sensitive could better recognize and cope with adaptation demands concomitant with the loss of a spouse. Similarly, the rigidity associated with the noble self attitude type seems likely to prolong the difficulties encountered during the requisite reordering of the social system. Finally, rhetorical reflectors would seem to also experience difficulties during transition in developing caring and sharing relationships.

Of even greater interest is the effect the loss of the spouse might have on changing communication attitudes. Perhaps such a turning point represents a period of the adult developmental process which influences rhetorical sensitivity, and in turn, one's ability to cope with change. Although it has been demonstrated that one's rhetorical sensitivity, can change with training, such a change attributable to an event in one's life has yet to be demonstrated.[7]

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and a dramatic, stress producing situation--namely, the loss of a spouse through death, legal separation, or divorce. A secondary purpose was to collect data on rhetorical sensitivity from members of an actual organization, Parents Without Partners.

McConnell and Anderson suggest that all who lose a spouse must endure a "grieving" process, even if the status is the result of a divorce or separation and not a death.[8] The grief is for a past social system and interaction pattern. The predictable pattern of a typical grief reaction includes emotional distress, physical feelings of emptiness, numbness, inability to take social initiative, disorganization of normal encoding patterns, anger or irritability

with friends or relatives and feelings of guilt. The period of guilt reflects the divorced/separated person's acceptance of blame for the failed marriage or the widowed person's subconscious wish for the spouse to die. Butler and Lewis[9] point out that adjusting to the loss of a spouse is a process that may last for a year or longer. The ability to recognize and function in a reordered social system marks the end of the grieving period.

Whereas members of the individual's social system may eventually withdraw support from the widowed, the divorced/separated may in addition be ostracized. There is an uneasiness about accepting a single person in an interaction pattern dominated by couples. After the initial expression of sympathy, family and friends may find further communication with the widowed to be a painful reminder of their personal loss, mortality, or awkwardness in knowing how to comfort a grieving person. The divorced/separated experience the initial outpouring of sympathy less frequently. More often, friends and family enhance feelings of guilt.

Thus, the widowed and divorced/separated may choose to cope with their guilt by seeking out other singles or relying on their own resources. The use of support groups, like Parents Without Partners, represents an attempt to change or adapt to the interpersonal requirements of a new social system.

Parents Without Partners describes itself as an international non-profit, non-sectarian educational organization devoted to the welfare and interests of single parents and their children. Since the only membership requirements is that one be single and a parent, PWP represents a cross-section of the millions who have experienced a marriage termination, have children and are going through a reorganization of their lives.

Method

Subjects

The 115 adults who served as subjects were volunteers from PWP chapters. Twenty-four of the members were widowed and 91 were divorced or separated.

The sample was approximately 75% female with an age range from 32 to 67 and a mean of 49.5 years.

Procedure

During regularly scheduled meetings of several Michigan PWP Chapters, the RHETSEN scale was administered to all members present. The RHETSEN scale was accompanied by a cover sheet which elicited information of interest to the present study.

Testing Instruments

The survey questionnaire (cover sheet) elicited information regarding age, sex, marital status history, marital satisfaction and reasons for joining PWP. Respondents were assured that their answers would remain anonymous.

The RHETSEN instrument provides a valid and reliable method for distinguishing among the attitudes people hold toward encoding interpersonal messages. The 40 item paper and pencil questionnaire was used in a large scale national survey of college students in order to empirically identify the characteristics of the attitude typology. Results from this landmark study indicate that distinct empirical differences are manifested among the noble selves, rhetorical reflectors, and those high in rhetorical sensitivity.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Target Groups Based on RHETSEN DATA

	Divorced/Separated (n=91)	Widowed (n=24)
Rhetorical Sensitivity	28.00(±7.92)	22.88(± 9.22)
Noble Self	13.27(±5.49)	17.25(±7.52)
Rhetorical Reflector	9.46(±5.59)	10.96(±6.98)

Results

Subjects who had children of school age were asked to respond to the following question, "Do you feel that your state and local taxes should be increased to provide for better educational facilities and academic activities for your children? (Check one) Yes___Maybe___No___. Those with greater rhetorical sensitivity scores did tend to select the "Maybe" response more than those with lower rhetorical sensitivity scores ($t=2.8$; $df=50$; $p < .01$).

Table 1 shows that the widowed were found to score significantly lower on rhetorical sensitivity ($t=2.7$, $df=113$; $p < .01$) and significantly higher on noble self ($t=2.9$, $df=113$, $p < .01$) than did the divorced/separated. No significant differences were found between the two groups on rhetorical reflector ($t=1.2$, $df=113$, $p > .05$).

The subjects were asked to check one of three choices in describing their most recent marital relationship; "totally disappointing," both "disappointing and satisfying" or"totally satisfying". In the upper 25% of the noble self scores, five of the six widows reported that they found their prior marriage totally satisfying. In the lower 25% of the noble self scores, only two of the six widows reported that their previous marriage was totally satisfying. In contrast, the upper 25% of the noble self scores for divorced/separated reported no more or less total dissappointment or total satisfaction with their previous marriages than the lower 25%.[10]

Discussion

The finding that subjects who selected the "maybe" response regarding support for increased local school taxes did have significantly higher rhetorical sensitivity scores suggests that the concept of rhetorical sensitivity as measured by the RHETSEN scale manifests the expected response to a variety of stimuli in the social system. Since this study began before validity data were published, it was felt necessary to obtain some evidence of

predictive validity for the purposes of the present study. High rhetorically sensitive individuals were expected to indicate "maybe" since they would consider more situtational factors before making a decision to vote "yes" or "no". Low rhetorically sensitive individuals were expected to indicate "yes or "no" without consideration for special circumstances that might alter the decision of those high in rhetorical sensitivity. These predictions were supported.

Why did the RHETSEN data for the widows differ from the RHETSEN data for the divorced/separated following loss of spouse? The findings suggest that the grieving process may differ for the two groups. For example, recent studies indicate that some widowed people have hallucinations and delusions of contact with the lost spouse. These may last for years and are more likely to occur in individuals who were happily married.[11] To be sure, the divorced/separated could not be expected to be grieving the loss of a happy marriage.

Additionally, the widowed often take on the characteristics of the lost spouse.[12] Caine explains the personal feeling that her dead husband had become part of her.[13] She came to view the episodes in which her spouse's presence continued to influence her behavior as part of her crazy period. One can hardly be sensitive to one's environment when overcome by such phenomena. Further, the influence of the dead spouse may cause more rigid behavior on the part of the widowed. This rigidity is caused by the desire to be true to the spouse's characteristics. Again, this process does not typically occur in the divorced/separated situation.

These differences may be further explained by self-validation processes.[14] According to the self-validation model, the individual presents a self-concept to others. Since the presentation of self includes the roles and social status of the individual, the new role of widowed or divorced/separated changes the impression one makes on others. Others tend to validate one's self-presenta-

tion making the social response very different for those whose spouse has died than for those who have electively terminated a marriage. While the widowed may blame fate for the end of their marriages, the divorced often feel a sense of failure in one of society's most cherished institutions and blame themselves, at least partially. It is not surprising then that the noble self scores of the widowed are higher considering the initial positive response of society to the death of a spouse. Similarly, it is not surprising that the noble self socres of the divorced are lower considering the negative response of society to their new status.

Conclusion

This preliminary research effort examined the communication attitudes of those coping with a turning point in life. Although the widowed and divorced/separated share a common experience, loss of spouse and PWP membership, this study found that the loss of spouse produced differences in rhetorical sensitivity and noble self. This reordering of one's social system deserves further analysis.

Footnotes

[1] R. Hart and D. Brooks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction, Speech Monographs, 39 (1972), 75-91.

[2] R. Hart, R. Carlson, and W. Eadie, "Attitude toward Communication and the assessment of Rhetorical Sensitivity", Communication Monographs, 47 (1980), 1-22.

[3] Hart and Brooks, p. 91.

[4] D. Darnell and W. Brocksiede, Persons Communicating, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976) 176.

[5] G. Shulman, "The Effects of Training on Rhetorical Sensitivity in the College Classroom (Unpublished paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980); M. Krugel and G. Shulman, "The Relationship Between Rhetorical Sensitivity and the Sex, I.Q., and Academic Level of High School Students," Michigan Speech Association Journal, 14 (1979), 114-119.

[6] R. Carlson, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and the Nursing Profession," (Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980); L. McCallister, "Verbal Reprimanding Among Superiors: A Profile of the Noble Self"(Unpublished Paper, Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1980); D. Cahn and G. Shulman, "An Exploratory Study of the Relationship Between Rhetorical Sensitivity, Leadership Effectiveness, and Rank in a Military Organization", Michigan Speech Association Journal, 15 (1980), in Press.

[7] Shulman.

[8] A. McConnel and B. Anderson, Single After 50 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

[9] R. Bulter and M. Lewis, Aging and Mental Health (St. Louis; Mosby, 1977).

[10] Subjects were also asked to list the three most important reasons they had for joining PWP. Responses were content analyzed by two coders. The over-

whelming response for both divorced/separated and widowed was to meet people, socialize and find companionship. After this response, the divorced/separated reported the organizations activities that include children and the activities that allow the adults to get out and do something. The second reason given by the widowed was the activities that allow the adults to get out and do something. The third reason was to feel needed by helping others. Rejection by one's former associates may explain the pattern of response. Each of the three most popular reasons given by the divorced/separated represent an attempt to seek interpersonal interactions in a new social system. The widowed responses are similar, but include the altruistic reason of helping others.

[11]Bulter and Lewis.

[12]E. Lindemann, "Symptomology and Management of Acute Grief," American Journal of Psychiatry, 101 (1944), 141-148.

[13]L. Caine, Widow (New York: Morrow, 1974).

[14]D. Cahn, "Employee Evaluation as a Self-Validation Process," Journal of Employment Counseling 16 (1979), 31-37; D. Cahn, "Interpersonal Communication and Transactional Relationships: Clarification and Application," Communication Quarterly, 24 (1976), 38-44; D. Cahn, "The Employment Interview: A Self-Validation Model," Journal of Employment Counseling, 13 (1976), 151-155.